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***Written Testimony in Opposition to HB 5447 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Auditors of Public Accounts Concerning Private Providers of Special Education***

To Members of the Education Committee:

I am a resident of Suffield, a parent of three children. Two neurotypical daughters and a son who has been diagnosed with Autism. I am also a member of Suffield's Board of Education. Although there are some aspects of HB 5447 with which I agree, other pieces are unacceptable, and so I am writing to ask you to oppose the bill until it can be reviewed and revised with input from all stakeholders who engage with children who could be helped or harmed by this bill.

My principal concern is with the section that details that the state will develop a rate schedule for the amount that may be charged by a private provider of special education services, including a percentage limitation on the amount that may be allocated for administrative costs. The inherent issue with this one size fits all approach is that it is likely to dramatically change the types of services that schools are able to provide or even more tragically may require some of these special education schools to close their doors due to not being able to sustain an adequate operating budget with a fixed cost that will not cover all of the services that is assumed given the extensive needs of the children these schools serve on a daily basis.

I am deeply invested in the negative effects this bill may have on children with disabilities, as my son's private special education school—one that is more expensive than average—changed his life significantly. My son has autism and attention deficit disorder which at times led him to having difficulties within a typical classroom even with a 1:1 paraprofessional. Suffield Public Schools demonstrated a tremendous lack of ability and understanding in dealing with a child with extensive needs and this led to my son being restrained many times a week and being put in seclusion in a 4x4 "box" that was "specifically made for my son" without out consent and/or knowledge. Once my son was placed in a private special education school essentially all of his negative and physical behaviors disappeared almost immediately. The change in my son's behavior has impacted him in many ways, including social/emotionally and academically. My husband and I cannot believe the change that has occurred in my son in 2 years of being at a school that understands his disability, is willing to adapt and strategize learning and social experiences to make him successful with his peers and his school work and present an environment in which he has developed a true sense of himself and feels proud of his accomplishments. At the end of our son's time in SPS, my husband and I feared that our son would not be a successful, functioning part of society; however, in 2 short years at his new school we now have hope that our son will indeed be a success in his school, but that he will hopefully move onto a 2 or 4 year college and get a job and live independently much like the same hopes we have for his sisters.

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When considering this bill, please consider that private special education schools have a wide range of services—some offer programming for students in small groups, some offering 1:1 instruction, some with Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) and psychologists on staff, some students need speech/language services (often added on to tuition) occupational and/or physical therapy services. Fixing a rate for schools across the board simply makes no sense when attempting to individual each of these special children's educational experience in order to help ensure that they become more functional and hopefully more independent as they move towards adulthood. I urge you to oppose and vote no to Bill HB 5447.

If I can be of further help, please email me or call. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan Mercik Davis